

Lounger's Miscellany.

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"Vouchsafe, O, thou the mournfull'st Muse of nine!
That wont'ft the tragick stage for to direct,
In funeral complaints and wailful time
Reveal to me."

SPENSER.

FEW people have arrived at a greater degree of perfection, or have so richly merited the applause bestowed on them, as the English. Liberty has been ascribed as the chief engine that has wrought so much in favour of the arts in general; but, be this as it may, it has undoubtedly sometimes acted as a discouragement. The free and unreserved opinions that are daily given on theatrical performances, as void of truth as they are of real criticism, have given a fatal stab to the writers of *tragedy*; and in this, as well as some other manufactures, our nation is considerably below *par*. How any art is to flourish in a land where every thing that is disheartening is brought forward, and, as it were, thrown into the teeth of the adventurer, no one can possibly say. Independent of the fear engendered in such a man, he is absolutely hamstrung by the rules of his art; and is so effectually reduced to one chain of thinking, that his abilities are cramped and contracted. Dramatic

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poetry,

poetry, we are told, should consist of at least five general rules, *viz.* Fable, Unity, Action, Character, Style; each of which may have their sub-divisions and restrictions. When such a load of difficulties are opposed to genius, as so many blocks over which it may be thrown, some allowance should be granted to authors to strike out new rules of their own, and throw off the shackles with which their imaginations are encumbered.

Many very excellent, and indeed sensible, dramatists are of opinion, that the servility of attending to the *unities* robs the *fable* of its spirit, and, instead of producing the effect which Aristotle had conceived would be wrought by it, excludes the powers of variety. The most pleasing sensation, say they, that pantomime can raise, is excited by the contrast of the *actions*, which again are considerably helped by shifting the landscape; at one time placing Harlequin in India, and in five minutes after importing him to London. Here indeed there is some solid argumentation; but still more may be advanced in support of the idea. They may add, the history of the different quarters of the globe are in a pleasing manner thus laid open to the public, and the poor butcher from White-chapel is insensibly as learned as the first student in the land. By this means also, without the use of a pocket volume, so much is compressed in a little, that we may return from an entertainment of two hours, fully acquainted with the manners of the inhabitants of the Ganges.

So much for the *Unities*: the next thing is *Character*. To this they are not at all compelled to attend; here they have not so much to trouble themselves about; for character is more forcibly delineated by dress and action, than by all the fine speeches that can be written. Taciturnity, for instance, says the Irishman, is much better expressed by dumb show; for a man of such a disposition may talk to eternity of himself, and the devil-a-bit will he make his character the better known for it. In many like instances, the force of dress and external appearance will go further than words. The Dutchman is known by his phlegm and



his breeches; the Frenchman by his sprightliness and address; the Irishman by his ingenuous visage; and the Scotchman by the œconomy of his small-cloaths. If a character, indeed, cannot be dressed, it is that of a Englishman, whose principal trait being placed within his ribs, must depend entirely on his words and actions.

Longinus informs us, that *Style* may be obtained by a close and unwearyed application to the works of the best writers. By an imitation and emulation of the greatest poets that ever lived, a more fixed and lasting scope is given to our labours. Hence it is, that numbers of imitators are ravished and transported by a spirit not their own, and raise an altar to their fame, “*from whence exhale divine evaporationes.*” Had this learned critic lived long enough to review the piles of English literature, he would have found good cause for altering his opinion: he would have discovered, that the best writers in the estimation of the moderns have no originality, at least what they have written is not sufficiently worthy of imitation. Shakespeare, who is a tolerable hand at a tragedy, falls so short of the idea entertained by Longinus of an original, that he is very properly excluded from the higher classes of poets. Indeed, whoever may have the madness to attempt to imitate him, will find himself completely plunged into difficulties. It is for this reason that our three great dramatists, Dryden, Lee, and Thomson, have thought proper to reject his style, and strike out one more congenial to the grandeur and sublimity of tragedy. In the writings of these men we find the true pathos, pure and artlessly spun out; in Shakespeare pathos is intermingled with buffoonery: in the one, we see depicted the lives of Gods and heroes; in the other, the interjections of an insolent grave-digger.

In addition to these remarks on tragedy, it may not be unenter-taining to give occasional extracts from such plays as do not, from their scarcity, often fall into the hands of Readers; such as are

not completely excellent of themselves, but are frequently bedecked with beauties irresistibly enchanting.

That a *periphrasis* (or circumlocution) is a cause of the true sublime, nobody can well deny. The most skilful writer in this way was one William Hunt, who wrote the "Fall of Tarquin." Few writers could have made more of their subject than himself; the most trivial circumstances are admirably expressed.

" And the tall trees stood circling in a row!"

Of the right use of the *hyperbole* we have a copious discourse in the 38th section of Longinus. The *hyperbole* is literally an impossibility, and therefore can only then be seasonable or productive of sublimity, when the circumstances may be stretched beyond their proper size, that they "may appear, without fail, important and great." An instance of this kind occurs in the play of the Italian Husband, written by Mr. Edward Lewis, 1754:

Fortia. " You know his lordship's bailiff Giovanni

" Lives in a farm near to his castle gate."

" Whilst he at dinner sat, a favourite hen

" Came cackling, and at 's feet laid a live chick,

" Perfect with wings and claws, with eyes and voice,

" Which ran without delay after its mother."

" But, lo! a greater wonder justly fills

" All hearts with horror and amazement dire:

" Just underneath the table th' earth gap'd wide,

" And did disclose a bubbling spring of blood,

" Whence drops resulting sprinkled all the board.

" Fix'd in suspence at this, one from the cellar

" Ran, and declar'd the wine was in a ferment,

" Tho' fin'd before, and boil'd in every vessel,

" As if set o'er a fire intense and large.

" Mean while a serpent's carcase they beheld

" Dragg'd out of doors, with eager haste, by weasels;

" A shepherd's bitch came gaping, from whose jaws

“ Leap’d forth a lively, large, tun-belly’d toad :

“ A ram ran full against a dog spontaneous,

“ And at one fatal stroke brake the dog’s neck.”

Had these prodigies been passed over in a flimsy way, by a mere detail of facts, the wonderful solemnity they bear with them would be totally destroyed. Independent of these, and many other beauties that cannot but seize the astonished reader, he concludes his play in a manner truly novel. Disdaining the stale trick of the bowl and the dagger, and not being contented, like Taucred, to present the lover’s heart in a vase to his mistress, he has made an “ *electuary* ” of his hero’s vitals, and compelled his heroine to swallow it.

The hyperbolé, when properly applied, is one of the finest figures in rhetoric; but the boasted Shakespeare has over-leaped the bounds of probability in every application of it. Who can read with patience the following quotation?

— “ The city cast

“ Her people out upon her, and Antony

“ Enthron’d i’th’ market-place, did sit alone

“ Whistling to th’ air; which, but for vacancy,

“ Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,

“ And made a gap in nature.”

SHAKSP. Ant. and Cleopat.

Overshooting the mark often spoils the figure; and whatever is over-stretched, loses its tone, and immediately relaxes. Such are the remarks that every judicious observer must make on a comparative estimate of the abilities of our numerous poets.

Whatever then may be advanced against this Essay, let it be remembered, that it is written as an attempt to drag from obscurity the neglected elegancies of the drama; to curb the impetuosity and freedom with which praises are bestowed on improper objects; and to apologize for the moderns in their unsuccessful efforts in tragedy. If in some points it be thought good, and in others bad, no words

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can be more apt in extenuation than those of Longinus: "In the
" *Sublime*, as in great affluence of fortune, some minuter articles
" will unavoidably escape observation. But it is almost impossible
" for a low and groveling genius to be guilty of error, since he
" never endangers himself by soaring on high, or aiming at emi-
" nence, but still goes on in the same uniform secure track, whilst
" its very height and grandeur exposes the *Sublime* to sudden falls.
" In passing judgement upon the works of an author, we always
" muster his imperfections, so that the remembrance of his faults
" sticks indelibly fast in the mind; whereas that of his excellencies
" is quickly worn out. The faults of great men are not so
" much voluntary as accidental slips that occur through inadvert-
" tence; such as, when the mind is intent upon things of a higher
" nature, will creep insensibly into compositions: for which reason
" I give it as my real opinion, that great and noble flights
" ought to carry off the prize, by the sole merit of their own
" intrinsic grandeur."

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